

ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	UTED-00	VC-00	TEDE-00
	INR-00	L-00	VCE-00	AC-00	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OMB-00
	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00	SS-00
	TRSE-00	T-00	IIP-00	PMB-00	DRL-00	G-00	SAS-00
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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1374
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000422

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL PGOV PINR VM CH HUMANR ETMIN CVR REFFREE
SUBJECT: (SBU) GVN ADVISOR THANH ON PARTY REFORM, CHINA, CENTRAL
HIGHLANDS AND VIETNAM-USG RELATIONS

REF: A) HCMC 127 B) 04 HCMC 1400 C) HCMC 55 D) HANOI 909

¶1. (SBU) Summary and Comment: Special Advisor to the Prime Minister in the South Vo Viet Thanh described for the Consul General on April 18 his frustrations with the pace and tenor of reform in Vietnam and outlined ideas for change, particularly within Vietnam's Communist Party (CPV). Thanh said that the majority of senior CPV members -- spurred by growing unease over China's strength in the region -- see a long-term convergence of interests with the United States and favor greater strategic dialogue with the USG. Pro-Chinese elements and party ideologues are resisting this trend, however. Thanh, who had just returned from a "fact finding" trip to the Central Highlands, said that the GVN is striving to deal with hardline provincial officials that are obstructing implementation of Hanoi's new approach to resolve social, religious and economic problems involving the region's ethnic minorities, including family reunification (VISAS 93) issues. Thanh is aligned with the reformist wing of the Party and his comments seem to reflect an internal CPV debate on how the Party must adapt to changing domestic and international conditions in the run-up to the CPV's 10th Party Congress in 2006. End Summary and Comment.

¶2. (SBU) Consul General and PolOff met with Special Advisor to the Prime Minister for the South Vo Viet Thanh on April 18. This was our third meeting with Thanh, who had returned from a weeklong "fact finding" trip to the Central Highlands. Thanh had met with us twice before, in November 2004 and January 2005 (refs A and B). Thanh is a protege of former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, a leading advocate of economic and social reform within the CPV.

Reforming the Party, Dissent and Human Rights

¶3. (SBU) Thanh spent a considerable amount of our three-hour lunch discussion focusing on his frustrations with the functioning of the Party. Thanh said that to combat corruption, end cronyism and spur economic growth, the CPV needed substantial reform. "I participated in the revolution to build a more democratic regime, not a dictatorship," Thanh said. Thanh contended that the CPV must extend the right of the people to vote for their leaders to the senior-most levels of Government and Party. (Vietnam has been experimenting with limited and controlled grassroots "democracy" at the village level.) Thanh said that he also has been urging Vietnam's political elite to focus less on drafting and interpreting party resolutions and more on passing concrete laws that are needed to spur Vietnam's modernization, international integration and economic growth.

¶4. (SBU) Thanh added that the Party must learn to accept far more criticism than it now tolerates. Thanh, former Deputy Minister of Public Security, said that he is working on a proposal to redefine what is legally considered a dissident or a "reactionary element" so as to give the average Vietnamese more room for constructive criticism. The CPV also needs to recognize that it cannot remain isolated or separate from the evolution in international thinking on concepts of human rights and religious freedom. These are universal norms, not U.S. constructs, that Vietnam and the CPV must embrace in order for Vietnam to integrate effectively with the rest of the world.

¶5. (SBU) Thanh said that he recently had discussed the case of the Tuoi Tre journalist Lan Anh with the Minister of Public Security (ref C). (Lan Anh is facing indictment for allegedly revealing "state secrets" while reporting on a price gouging scandal linked to the Ministry of Health.) The Minister had explained that Anh's reporting had disrupted an ongoing corruption investigation. The MPS is investigating whether or not there was corruption or

malfeasance on the journalist's part that led her to break the story prematurely. Thanh had cautioned the Minister that the case had attracted significant public attention and that the MPS "better be right" if they take this case to trial, or risk facing a scathing backlash.

¶6. (SBU) Thanh said that he could not predict if the CPV would implement internal political reforms at the 2006 10th Party Congress, although over time, reform was "inevitable." In our January meeting Thanh was more confident, telling us that 2006 would usher in a period of political "Doi Moi" (renovation) comparable to the economic reform that Vietnam initiated in 1986. (Note: in a recent conversation with the Ambassador, Party External Relations Commission Chair Nguyen Van Son also said that the upcoming Party Congress would address "political doi moi." End Note. Ref D.)

Relationship with the U.S. and China

¶7. (SBU) Thanh said that the majority of Hanoi's senior leadership believes that over the long term Vietnam and the United States will not have fundamental conflicts but only "shared interests."

While a minority of conservative ideologues still want to keep the United States at arms' length, disquiet over growing Chinese influence in the region tipped the scales in favor of Vietnam forging improved ties with the United States. In this regard, Thanh indicated that the GVN would welcome enhanced strategic or policy planning dialogue with the USG on China and the region. At the same time, Thanh cautioned that the United States needed to avoid creating the impression that we are an immediate threat to the Vietnamese regime. This would only strengthen the pro-Chinese lobby at senior levels of the Party. The CG replied that, while we welcome and encourage strengthened dialogue, Vietnamese leaders had to become more sophisticated in approaching sensitive issues such as human rights and religious freedom.

Central Highlands and VISAS-93

¶8. (SBU) Thanh said that the GVN sees clearly which provinces in the Central Highlands are implementing Hanoi's directives to resolve religious freedom issues and economic tensions involving ethnic minorities and which are not. It is becoming increasingly clear in Hanoi that local officials are misusing concerns over "instability" in the region as an excuse to keep the pressure on ethnic minority and religious groups. This is particularly the case in Dak Lak Province, where senior Party leaders have not "adjusted" to Hanoi's new approach on ethnic minority and religious issues. However, the Prime Minister does not have the authority to remove CPV officials from their positions; Thanh maintained that the situation is particularly delicate in Dak Lak as some of the hardline officials, including the local Party Secretary, are from the ethnic minority community. He said that

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personnel changes could occur following the provincial Party congresses in late 2005.

¶9. (SBU) Thanh said that the GVN also is committed to resolve the problem of reunification of ethnic minority refugee families (VISAS-93 cases). In February he had met with the Minister of Public Security and handed over our list of outstanding cases. The MPS Minister reportedly had said he was going to issue a directive to the provinces to speed up processing of the cases. Thanh advised that the MPS must be at the center of any solution to resolve the VISAS 93 issue and encouraged us to notify the Minister directly of continuing problems. He characterized the MPS Minister as trustworthy and reasonably "progressive." (Note: The Ambassador has on two occasions sent lists of outstanding VISAS-93 cases to the Minister of Public Security. End Note.)

¶10. (SBU) Comment: Thanh was unusually direct in discussing internal reform, distrust of China, and combating corruption and cronyism. His message was very carefully and deliberately articulated; in fact, he did not want to leave until he had finished delivering his message on China, which was well past the second cup of coffee. However, his themes are consistent with the position of many reformers within the Party, of which, Thanh is a loyal and respected member. It is not clear why we are getting this message so strongly at this time, but the views that Thanh articulated appears to reflect reformers' concern that the Party must modernize or risk losing legitimacy. It also reflects their concern -- as nationalists -- that the Party must reform to be able to address effectively Vietnam's security and economic needs. These reformers are locked in an ongoing internal debate with conservatives in advance of the 10th Party Congress. End Comment.

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